



Bombing Heroin Labs in Afghanistan The Latest Act in the Theatre of Counternarcotics

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Front cover photos: From left to right: Opium trader testing the quality of opium; Taliban soldiers; Boghra canal, Hilmand; buildings struck on 19 November 2017 in Mosaqala district centre, Hilmand.

Back cover photos: Left to right: Short bladed equipment, known locally as Neshtars, used for lancing the opium crop, typical of Nangarhar in eastern Afghanistan; One Chakai (1.2kg) of fresh opium wrapped in opium poppy leaves and tied with string, Nangarhar, eastern Afghanistan; Two man (9kg) of fresh opium stored in a polythene bag, typical of the southern provinces like Hilmand; Neshtars typical of southern Afghanistan and sold in a shop in Lashkar Gah, Hilmand.

Photos: Alcis, David Mansfield, OSDR.

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About International Drug Policy Unit

The **International Drug Policy Unit (IDPU)** is a cross-regional and multidisciplinary project harnessing LSE research and expertise. Hosted by LSE US Centre.

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Summary

The US Department of Defence (DoD) has relented. After 16 years of refusing to bend to the pressure of those driving the counternarcotics effort in Afghanistan and destroy the 'labs' where opium is processed, DoD finally issued the authorities that allowed these buildings to be destroyed. On the first night of the campaign on 19 November 2017, 10 buildings were levelled. It was claimed that each was a drugs lab funding the Taliban. With the onset of this campaign, those working or residing in these labs were no longer viewed as civilians involved in a criminal activity but as enemy combatants and subject to lethal force. These labs and those operating them now represent in the words of General Nicholson, Commander of both US Forces in Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and the North Atlantic Council Organization (NATO) Resolute Support Mission, the 'Taliban's narcotics financing'.

To justify this dramatic change in policy the script used to describe the insurgency has been radically rewritten. Under the most recent rewrite the Taliban are robbed of any political ambition and are described as engaging in violence to protect their criminal activities; they are according to General Nicholson a 'narco insurgency'. The beginnings of this narrative can be traced back to the spring of 2017 when the opium crop was approaching harvest. By the summer, when most policy makers and analysts would have been fully aware that 2017 would see an exponential rise in opium poppy cultivation, the Taliban stood accused of having monopoly control over heroin processing and exports.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the air strikes began only four days after the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) officially announced that cultivation had risen by 120,000 hectares over the course of only one growing season, and that an unprecedented 328,000 hectares of opium poppy had been grown in Afghanistan in 2017. This was a rate of growth and a level of total cultivation that sat uncomfortably with USFOR-A's assertion that the Afghan government controlled two thirds of the population and that the insurgency had not made any major inroads into territory over the course of the previous year. The air campaign against drugs labs has been accompanied by further hyperbole and additions to the 'narco insurgency' script, including estimates of the losses inflicted on drug traffickers and the Taliban, running in the tens of millions of dollars.

Drawing on high resolution imagery and field research conducted ten days after the initial air strikes of 19 November 2017, this paper examines the efficacy of this new campaign and the logic that underpins it. The paper questions the contribution that the destruction of drugs labs will make to either 'the war on terror' or 'the war on drugs' and casts doubt on its value for money and its effect, particularly given the potential for civilian casualties and - contrary to official estimates - its negligible effect on the drugs trade and Taliban financing. The paper is written by Dr David Mansfield who has been conducting research in rural Afghanistan for over 20 years. He is a Senior Fellow at LSE and the author of 'A State Built in Sand: How Opium undermined Afghanistan'.

Act 1. Setting the Policy Scene

Those who have worked on drugs policy for any period of time have become familiar with interventions that confound obvious logic.¹ No matter how hard you try to work through the explanation offered for some interventions, the justification does not satisfy the 'smell test', let alone a simple cost-benefit analysis. Some interventions might even appear to do more harm than good when judged against the very metrics that are used for assessing performance against drug control objectives, such as the often cited hectares of opium and coca grown.

Some argue that the explanation for flawed policy choices are government bureaucracies that are wedded to the existing prohibition regime underpinned by the UN drug control treaties.² Having worked amongst many intelligent and conscientious policy makers and analysts in government I find this explanation too dismissive and rather disingenuous. There are undoubtedly those that some might consider zealots within the system, bent towards policy-based-evidence rather than evidence-based-policy. However, these individuals and their institutions often play only a supporting role in policymaking and have only a bit-part in what can only be called the theatre of counternarcotics.

The reality is drugs policy is situated on a much wider political and economic stage where other priorities typically get the lead roles. No more so than when policy focuses on geographic areas where illicit drug crops are grown. These are areas associated with poverty, ecological degradation, the exclusion of marginal groups, and most importantly violent conflict and insurgency. These are the scenes on the world stage where geopolitical issues and political and military objectives seem always to be given precedent.

Amidst the complex web of social, economic, political and environmental problems, policy choices are inevitably sub optimal. They are the result of deliberation and negotiation between different governments each with multiple departments with quite different interests, mandates and resources. Far from western taxpayers, who are increasingly sceptical of the value for money of supply side efforts of the 'war on drugs', drug control agencies find it increasingly difficult to get a central billing and maintain funding for counternarcotics efforts.

Simultaneously, the outcomes of resource competition between government departments is not just shaped by the underlying social problems to be addressed but also how those problems are perceived by politicians and the public at large. Much becomes about the script used to describe these problems and how they are then staged. Whereas previous interventions were frequently justified by recourse to the 'war on drugs'³, more recent interventions are sold under the supposed links between illicit drug production and problems du jour such as terrorism and insurgency even where the evidence for such links is tenuous.

There are indeed moments when counternarcotics is pulled into the limelight. However, this again is typically a function of the confluence of other political and military interests, and it is

only a question of time before drug control is once again relegated to understudy. As such, the conflation of narratives and a multiplicity of audiences has made it increasingly difficult to judge policies against their stated objectives, particularly when it comes to overseas drug control efforts.

It is against this backdrop that the United States Forces Afghanistan's (USFOR-A) decision to mount a campaign to bomb drug laboratories in Afghanistan needs to be judged. These strikes represent a very significant doctrinal, legal and policy shift and were launched only four days after the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported a 63% increase in the amount of land under opium poppy, with an unprecedented 328,000 hectares of the crop in Afghanistan in 2017.⁴ The findings of this UN report are in stark contrast to the USFOR-A's claims that the conflict in Afghanistan is in stalemate and that the Afghan government continues to maintain control or influence⁵ over two thirds of the population. Moreover, evidence from the ground showing civilian casualties and antipathy to the government, suggests that the destruction of these labs is not having a significant impact on counternarcotics objectives, and could serve to undermine the fight against the Taliban.

Act 2: Changing the Director

On the night of 19th November the United States Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and the Afghan Air Force mounted a number of airstrikes on targets described as 'drug labs'⁶ in southern Afghanistan. General Nicholson, Commander of both USFOR-A and the North Atlantic Council Organization's (NATO) Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, announced that these airstrikes were the beginning of a new and protracted campaign⁷ aimed at disrupting the Taliban's revenues.⁸

At the NATO press conference video clips showed buildings in northern Hilmand destroyed by a range of different munitions launched from a variety⁹ of planes, unmanned drones, and ground-based rocket systems.¹⁰ General Nicholson outlined changes in legal authorities¹¹ that ultimately redefined civilians engaged in a criminal enterprise into enemy combatants.¹² The significance of which is providing legal cover for lethal military force over law enforcement activities.

The aerial campaign continued throughout November and by mid-December USFOR-A announced¹³ the destruction of '25 narcotics processing labs from the Taliban inventory'. USFOR-A also claimed 'this equates to almost US\$ 80 million of drug money eliminated from the kingpin's pockets, while denying over US\$ 16 million of direct revenue to their Taliban partners'. US Air Force Brigadier General Lance Bunch described the effort as a 'new war', declaring that 'the gloves are off'.¹⁴

The decision to target drugs labs with airstrikes certainly marked a significant shift in policy. For 16 years the US Department of Defense (DoD) had resisted repeated pressure from both within and outside government to undertake a campaign against laboratories, due to concerns about its legality and its impact on its military objectives in Afghanistan. As General Barno, Commander USFOR-A between 2003 and 2005 had exclaimed, after the German military dropped a 500-pound bomb on an empty drugs lab in January 2004 following a raid by the Afghan Special Narcotics Force (ASNF), 'I don't want counternarcotics getting in the way of things'.¹⁵

One of the most ardent proponents within the US government for a campaign to destroy labs has been the US Department of State's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL). Mandated as the US government's lead agency for the overseas counternarcotics effort, the leadership at INL has long pressed for the destruction of drug processing facilities in Afghanistan. Robert Charles, Assistant Secretary of State for INL between 2003 and 2005, was particularly vocal in advocating for the destruction of drugs during his tenure and would often rebuke of DoD for its opposition during congressional testimony.¹⁶

Meanwhile, on the international stage both the Russian government¹⁷ and the United Nations Office on Drug Control¹⁸ both called for an aggressive campaign to destroy heroin¹⁹ laboratories in Afghanistan. A position that was initially rejected by both the Pentagon and NATO.



Figure 1 - Barrels, metal bowls and other basic equipment in a drugs lab in Afghanistan. This picture shows calcium morphine solution being drained into bowls.



Figure 2 - Dried crude Morphine base being scraped from a cloth into an empty container in a drugs lab in Afghanistan.

Act 3: Rewriting the Script

Despite their reservations the US military did provide medical, logistical, intelligence and air support for the interdiction of drugs labs in Afghanistan throughout much of the reconstruction period. For example, between 2003 and 2008 the ANSF - also known as Commando Force 333²⁰ - raided and destroyed heroin laboratories in Afghanistan.²¹ CF-333, an elite unit mentored by the UK, acted on intelligence to target heroin laboratories primarily in the east and north east of Afghanistan,²² before being re-tasks to counter terrorism efforts in 2009. Between January 2004 and August 2006 CF-333 destroyed 317 drugs labs²³; none of this could have been done without at least the tacit support of the US military and other military partners from International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

More direct US military support was provided to the Drugs Enforcement Administration (DEA) for its interdiction efforts, particularly during the military surge. In 2014 alone, the DEA reported that it had 'destroyed 38 clandestine drugs labs'.²⁴

However, what differentiates these earlier raids on drug labs from the campaign launched on 19th November 2017 is the use of aerial bombardment. In the past labs were targeted using ground forces and law enforcement; the military only provided support. The objective was to shut down a criminal activity, and where possible make arrests, collect evidence and effect a prosecution; these were actions designed to deliver a legal outcome and to strengthen the capacity of the Afghan government to enforce the law. This is in stark contrast with the current campaign which focuses on destroying labs and is being directed by US military forces. To justify such a significant shift in responsibilities and to allow for the targeting and killing of those that had previously been viewed as the responsibility of law enforcement, there was a need to rewrite the script, and link the drugs trade and the Taliban and press that the two were inseparable; Taliban funding was the means by which this would be done.

The degree to which the Taliban relies on funding from the drugs trade has always been disputed and to a large extent the variance in estimates has been more about politics than methodology. It has often been those agencies wishing to put drug control centre stage that have suggested a much more intimate relationship between the insurgency and the opium economy than the military, diplomats and the intelligence community. At the core of the debate is the tax collected at the farmgate, where UNODC, for example, has long argued that 10 per cent of the opium crop is accrued by the Taliban.²⁵ Many, however, challenge this claim as problematic, citing weak methodological underpinnings. Nevertheless, these estimates continue to be recycled by officials and the media – even in the face of in-depth research by organizations like the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit²⁶, who challenged the idea that the Taliban could run a taxation system in rural Afghanistan that the Inland Revenue or Internal Revenue System would be proud of.²⁷

References to the Taliban's dependency on the opium economy for its funding predate 2001 but it was Tony Blair who first used it as justification for military intervention in Afghanistan in a speech to the UK parliament in October 2001.²⁸ The basis of this link was intelligence that at the time a senior UK official said 'neither INL nor the UK Drugs and International Crime put much weight on'. The link between drugs and Taliban funding became much more explicit in the public policy debates in 2006 and 2007 when Tom Schweich of INL and Antonio Maria Costa, the Executive Director of the UNODC, directly linked the resurgent insurgency with rising levels of drug crop cultivation²⁹ and the funding that the Taliban earned from the crop. In a mark of revisionism from what UNODC had been writing at the time, and in contradiction to the World Bank's estimates, as well as those of respected scholar Dr Barnett Rubin, the Executive Director of UNODC even suggested that opium had been 'the regimes sole source of foreign exchange' between 1996 and 2000.³⁰ Claims that the Taliban relied on opium for

funding became an important part of the justification for aerial spraying that dominated the policy debates on counternarcotics in Afghanistan between 2004 and 2008.³¹

This was to change with the Obama Administration and, by 2010, counternarcotics was no longer a policy priority of the USG in Afghanistan. Officials at that time argued that the Taliban's funding came from other sources. For example, Ambassador Holbrooke, the Special Representative on Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP), at the time cited a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) study suggesting that the Taliban received most of its funds from illegal taxation and contributions from Pakistan and Persian Gulf nations³², and not from illicit drugs. Kirk Meyer, former Director of the Afghan Threat Finance Cell (ATFC) also challenged the notion that narcotics formed the primary source of funding for the Taliban, arguing that 'I personally never believed [drugs] was as big a funding source for the insurgency as a lot of people thought. It was a funding source, I am not denying that, but you used to hear these numbers all the time - a billion dollars and the like'.³³

In late 2016, the claim that the Taliban generated most of its funds from the opium trade resurfaced.³⁴ On this occasion it was General Nicholson who claimed that 60 percent of Taliban funding came from narcotics, once again raising the spectre of the Taliban and opium production being synonymous and that the insurgent's interests in opium poppy were primarily financial. UNODC supported this claim arguing that the Taliban earned US\$ 47 million from taxing the production of opium production at the farmgate and US\$ 164 million from taxing the trade in opiates overall.³⁵

In August 2017 the rhetoric on the Taliban's involvement in processing was ratcheted up a further notch, driven in part by an unprecedented 2017 crop. This time William Brownfield, Assistant Secretary of State, INL stated that 'I pretty firmly feel they are processing all the harvest'³⁶; a point that even UNODC challenged arguing that there was only 'anecdotal evidence' that some Taliban commanders were involved.³⁷

By the time that the campaign against the heroin labs was announced the Taliban had 'evolved into a narco-insurgency' according to General Nicholson³⁸, earning more than US\$ 200 million per year from the trade.³⁹ Further, he claimed, the Taliban had 'increasingly lost whatever ideological anchor they once had. They fight to preserve and expand their sources of revenue'.⁴⁰ According to this script the Taliban were not only involved in heroin processing but they were providing loans to farmers and where debts were not repaid 'the Taliban end up taking their sons or daughters as collateral, or they simply live in debt, a form of slavery, to the Taliban'.⁴¹ In fact, according to General Nicholson – and contrary to empirical research conducted with rural communities over more than two decades⁴² - it was both physical coercion and financial predation by the Taliban that compelled farmers to cultivate opium in the first place.

The accuracy of the account offered by General Nicholson did not matter,⁴³ the stage had been set, drugs labs along with those that worked in them were now considered legitimate military targets.

Act 4: Lights, Camera, Action!

One of the most concentrated air bombardments that took place on the 19 November 2017⁴⁴ was targeted on the district centre of Mosaqala some 91 kilometres north of Hilmand's provincial capital, Lashkar Gah (see Figure 3). Mosaqala has long been a focal point in the battle between the insurgency and Afghan government and NATO forces.

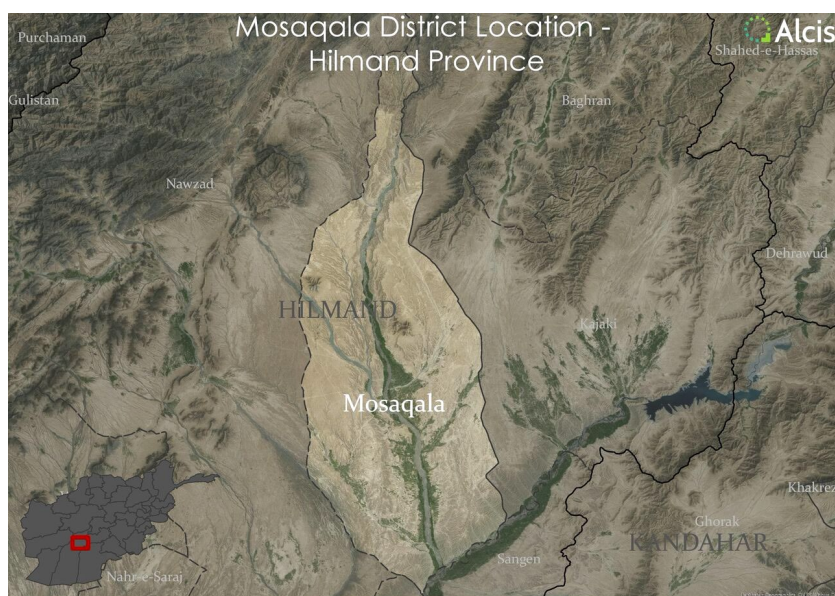


Figure 3 - Map of Mosaqala district, Hilmand province

In the district centre of Mosaqala the bombing campaign struck nine buildings⁴⁵ located to the south of the central market and less than half a kilometer from the district governor's compound (see Figure 5). Research on the ground shows that six of these buildings were adjacent to the opium

bazaar and rented out to opium traders on a short-term basis (see Figure 3 and 5). They were used to convert opium into 'cooked' opium or heroin. Each of these buildings was levelled to the ground on the night of 19th of November (see Figure 7).

The other three buildings targeted that night were not labs. One building was a house frequently used by local Taliban soldiers (3). The other two buildings targeted were owned by an opium trader, known as Hajji Habibullah, from the district of Baghran in northern Hilmand. One of the buildings destroyed was an empty store (2), the other (1) the residence of Hajji Habibullah himself.⁴⁶ On the night that the building was hit Hajji Habibullah was sleeping in his residence with his wife, and children: a 7-year-old daughter and four sons aged between 3 and 8. Visiting her parents that night was Habibullah's adult daughter, her husband and their 1-year-old daughter. Only Hajji Habibullah's son in law survived the attack. He was sleeping in the guest house in the south east corner of the compound, a building that was left unscathed by the aerial bombardment.

Reports collected for this report from those in the area that night say more civilians could have been killed were it not for many of the buildings being empty, occupied only by watchmen after daylight hours. Even the house where the Taliban soldiers usually stayed was thought to be empty. It is also alleged that the slight delay between the air strikes allowed any occupants to escape to the river to the west of the opium bazaar. No such opportunity was afforded to Hajji Habibullah and his family as it was his compound that was first struck.



Figure 4 - Children playing in the ruins of one of the buildings destroyed by the air strikes on 19 November 2017, Moosaqala, Hilmand.

While there is a growing criticism of USFOR-A's campaign against heroin labs in the media it would be wrong to suggest that the airstrikes have had no effect. The loss of civilian life, particularly the death of women and children, has led to local resentment and anger. Members of Parliament for Hilmand have already raised their concerns publicly.⁴⁷ Antipathy to foreign military presence is further exacerbated by an official narrative that presents the Taliban and the drugs trade as synonymous, and ignores the number of civilians killed. As an informant in Mosaqala declared: 'These are not Taliban, they killed women and children; NATO killed them'. The fact is the Afghan rural population is more familiar with the multiplicity of actors in Afghanistan involved in the drugs trade and the different hats that they wear; and is certainly far more nuanced than those responsible for psychological operations (PSYOP) in USFOR-A would like.

The airstrikes have also proved unsettling for the Taliban and traders in Mosaqala district centre. The Taliban showed signs of increased anxiety following the airstrikes, proving more vigilant in their search of vehicles and people travelling to Mosaqala and within the bazaar itself. There was even talk of caution amongst opium smugglers as they waited to see what USFOR-A's next move would be. Some even feared the airstrikes might signal the beginning of a campaign to retake the district.

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However, it is hard to believe that the air strikes in Mosaqala will have any lasting effect on the opium economy or Taliban revenues. The opium economy has, after all, proven remarkably resilient to shocks. As an economic mainstay for large sections of rural Afghanistan, the country's most valuable export and one of Afghanistan's largest employers, opium is



Figure 5 - Image of Moosaqala district centre showing the location of the air strikes on 19 November 2017

elemental to the political economy of the country. Past efforts to prohibit opium production such as the Taliban prohibition of 2000/01 and provincial level bans, such as those in Nangarhar and the central districts of Hilmand, have proven unsustainable. The fragile political settlement that has underpinned these efforts has all too often collapsed due to a growing resistance from the rural population, community and tribal elites, and politico-military actors looking for support from the populous.

Past efforts to target labs such as the work of Commando Force 333 only led to short term disruption due to the rudimentary equipment used in processing and the ease of moving operations elsewhere. Whilst skilled cooks are not so easy to find and demand relatively high wages there is little specialist equipment involved or significant capital outlay; as such the word lab is somewhat of a misnomer. Some law enforcement officials even claimed a lab could be replaced in 3 or 4 days, which led to such interdiction operations being described as a game of 'whack a mole'.⁴⁸ In fact, despite destroying what would appear to be hundreds of labs there was also little evidence that the operations of CF-333 or the DEA led to lab owners incurring significant losses, or signs of a shortage of opiates, or a corresponding change in market prices for inputs or outputs.

In the case of the airstrikes in Mosaqala the opium bazaar was open the morning after the bombardment, despite its proximity to the buildings targeted. There was no obvious evidence of a loss of capital in the form of precursor chemicals or inventory of opiates. Key informants argue that traders would not look to retain any meaningful stocks of cooked opium or heroin

in these kind of rented premises. Children playing in the ruins had said that they had found all but a limited trace of opium when they had scoured the site following the attack.

Furthermore, judging from both imagery and research on the ground there was little sense of an immediate reduction in the amount of business taking place. Fieldwork revealed that the price of opiates - fresh opium⁴⁹, 'cooked' opium⁵⁰, as well as heroin⁵¹ - remained the same, as did the wages of the skilled⁵² and unskilled labour⁵³ working in the 'labs'. Only the price of 'acid' - acetic anhydride - fluctuated following the airstrikes, falling by up to forty per cent from, US\$ 1,090 to US\$ 636 per litre,⁵⁴ due to increased availability. It is perhaps ironic that such a reduction in the price of acetic anhydride would bolster the profits on heroin; a direct consequence of 'acid' making up over 60 per cent of total production costs(see Figure 8).

With regard to the airstrikes impact on Taliban's finances the effect would appear to be negligible at best. Claims of Taliban control of processing are overstated, at least in the case of Mosaqala district centre. The buildings (4-9) that were destroyed were largely owned by local residents of Mosaqala, some of which have shops in the bazaar. These buildings were rented out to traders and smugglers to process opium. The rentable value of these properties was determined by the amount of opium processed. For example, rent for cooked or dried opium is 200 PR per kg, the equivalent of US\$ 1.80. Tax to the local Taliban commander is payable at a rate of 500 PR on each 5 kg cloth bag of dried opium (the equivalent of US\$ 0.91 per kg), and is 1,850 PR, the equivalent of US\$ 16.36, per kg of heroin. This equates to the equivalent of around 0.5 per cent of the value of 'cooked' opium and 1.5 per cent of the value of heroin, and as such is unlikely to break the bank.

Act 5: The Final Scene

There is much to be said for how problems are staged and presented to a world audience. The new authorities given by the Pentagon to USFOR-A allows for the revenue streams of the insurgency in Afghanistan to be directly targeted. There is no longer a requirement for the US military to limit the use of lethal force to when US forces are under direct attack or in support of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF). As such, the recent success in explicitly linking the Taliban with the opium economy has conflated military and counternarcotics objectives in a way that had not been done before and opened up a wide range of possible new targets for the US military in Afghanistan.

The dramatic rise in opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan in 2017 was sure to be a presentational problem for parts of the US administration and Afghan government. And it is probably no coincidence that the campaign targeting drugs labs for destruction began only four days after UNODC announced the figures. For the US military responsible for supporting the National Unity Government and its security forces, a rise of almost 130,000 hectares

11th Nov
2017



23rd Nov
2017



- 1- Residence of Hajj Habibullah (Opium Trader)
9 Killed - Habibullah + Tx wife
Tx adult daughter + 1yr old baby
Tx daughter (7yrs), 4x sons (3-8yrs)
1 Survived - Son-in-law (slept in guesthouse)
- 2- Empty shop belonging to Hajj Habibullah
0 Killed
- 3- Guesthouse for Taliban soldiers
0 Killed
- 4- Compound used for cooking opium/heroin processing
0 Killed
- 5- Compound used for cooking opium/heroin processing
0 Killed
- 6- Compound used for cooking opium/heroin processing
0 Killed
- 7- Compound used for cooking opium/heroin processing
0 Killed
- 8- Compound used for cooking opium/heroin processing
0 Killed
- 9- Compound used for cooking opium/heroin processing
0 Killed

Credits: Digital Globe, David Mansfield

Figures 6 and 7 - Images from both before and after the air strikes of 19 November 2017 on the nine buildings in Moosaqala district centre. Note the buildings proximity to the opium bazaar and the continued activity four days after the air strikes.

between 2016 and 2017 was not going to play well alongside a narrative of 'strategic stalemate' and an Afghan state that was holding ground against the insurgency.

On the other hand, rising levels of cultivation have always presented an opportunity to those responsible for drug control in Afghanistan. No more so than INL who over the last decade have often sought to cast the Taliban as the principal villain and beneficiary of the drugs trade in order to further its argument for widespread eradication, including the ubiquitous push for aerial spraying.

For 16 years these efforts largely fell on deaf ears, rejected by a Pentagon that was fundamentally opposed to being drawn into an aggressive counternarcotics effort for fear of alienating the rural population whose hearts and minds it hoped to win over. The diplomatic and development communities also viewed the links between the Taliban and drug traffickers as far more opportunistic than symbiotic. They also challenged the claim that it was the Taliban that made more money from drugs arguing that it was corrupt officials in the Afghan government who were the real stars of the show. Perhaps most importantly the intelligence community refused to buy in to the narrative, instead arguing that the relationship between the drugs trade and the insurgency was complex, nuanced and contextual.

One has to wonder why it is at this moment that a script reworked to tie the drugs trade and the insurgency so intimately has been accepted by USFOR-A when it was ardently resisted in the past. There is certainly little evidence to suggest there have been structural changes in the way that the drugs trade operates in Afghanistan.

For those with experience of the country the suggestion of any form of centralisation - let alone the opium economy - is quite frankly un-Afghan. The diversity that can be found in the country - in language, climate, terrain, politics and ethnicity - is also found in the opium economy. As much as opium prices vary from region to region there are different varieties of poppy, input requirements, and different types of tools used during the harvest. Units of measure vary from the seer and qatoos in the east⁵⁵, to the man, charack and khord in the south⁵⁶, as well as the paw and the tuli in the north east⁵⁷, alongside variance in the morphine yield and methods of storage. The concept of a centralised opium economy under the command and control of a movement such as the Taliban - which is highly decentralised in its own right - is almost as unrealistic in today's Afghanistan as that of a centralised government with a monopoly of the means of violence.

Aside from the problems in the rhetoric and hyperbole on the insurgency and the drugs trade offered by USFOR-A, the math just doesn't add up. USFOR-A claim that they inflicted \$80 US million in losses to drug traffickers by destroying 25 labs in the first 24 days of the campaign. They also report losses to the Taliban of \$US 16 million that would have been paid in taxes, a tax rate of 20 per cent. Yet, at current prices for heroin, the losses USFOR-A refer to would amount to almost 73 metric tons of heroin, that's nearly 3 metric tons of heroin in each lab

destroyed. With a conversion rate of between 9 and 13.5 kg of fresh opium per kilogram of heroin, this would require between 27,000 and 40,500 kg of fresh opium per lab. It would mean that the 25 labs destroyed were responsible for converting between 8 to 11 per cent of the entire 2017 crop of 9,000 metric tonnes. There is little evidence from the nine buildings destroyed in Mosaqala to support such a claim, and those more familiar with the way processing works argue it would be poor practice to keep this level of inventory on site.

Nor is there evidence to justify the claim that the Taliban lost \$US 16 million in revenues from the destruction of these labs. Going on the tax rates levied on the Mosaqala labs, were the aerial campaign to have actually destroyed 73 metric tons of heroin, the loss in revenue to the Taliban would have been around US\$ 1.2 million, considerably less than the amount reported by USFOR-A. Were the air attacks to have destroyed a series of houses rented out to cook opium in much smaller batches - as the case would appear to be in Mosaqala - the loss in revenue to the Taliban would have been negligible. In fact, the 50 barrels of opium cooking at the time of the strike that General Nicholson referred to as being worth 'millions of dollars'⁵⁸ would have been worth at most \$190,750 if converted to heroin and no more than \$2,863 to the Taliban in tax.⁵⁹

The campaign takes on even more dramatic overtures when the air attacks are judged against the potential monetary costs of a campaign of bombing drugs labs. For example, an F-22 raptor is estimated to cost US\$ 70,000 an hour to fly making the round trip cost from the UAE to Hilmand on 19th November around \$400,000 including refuelling.⁶⁰ Were the weapon costs to be factored in the price tag, the destruction of the nine buildings in Mosaqala would exceed \$US 1 million. Of course, the human cost in terms of the deaths of Haji Habibullah and his family in Mosaqala, as well as the loss of civilian life reported during other air attacks on labs⁶¹ is unquantifiable.

Given these costs and the negligible impact on drugs trafficking and the Taliban's revenues, we have to wonder what the air campaign against drugs labs is actually designed to achieve. There are those familiar with how the policy machine operates in an environment like Afghanistan who will recognise how the interests of multiple government agencies compete and become conflated as part of the official narrative. They will also recognise that while the script and direction of the current campaign against drugs labs has taken on the appearance of counternarcotics, the costs simply don't merit the benefits. So much so they might question whether the actual audience for this piece of theatre has any interest in drugs and drugs policy at all.

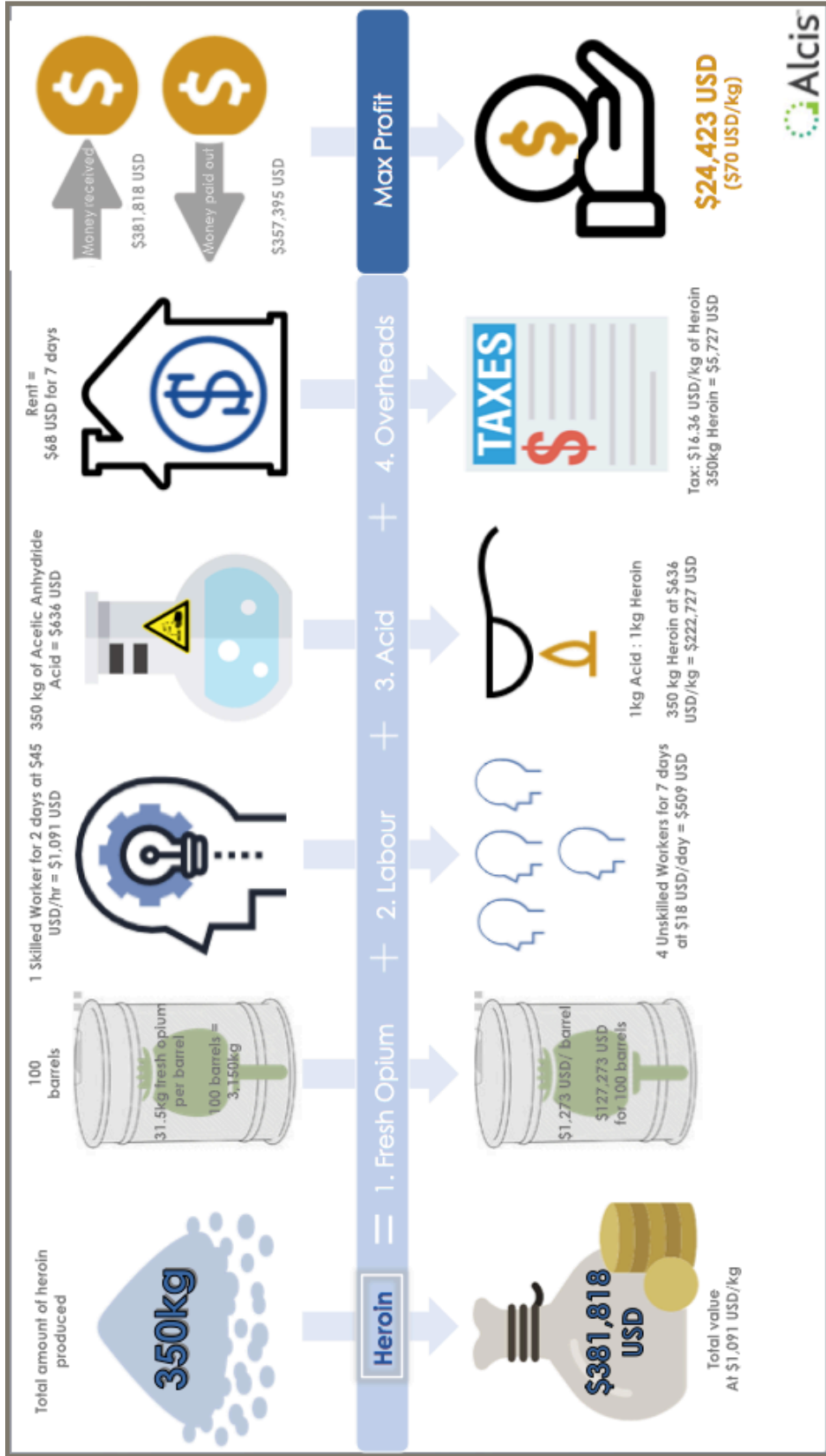


Figure 8 - Heroin processing costs.

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⁴⁹ The price of fresh opium was between 20,000 and 32,000 PR per man, the equivalent of US\$40 to US\$ 65 per kg.

⁵⁰ The price of "cooked" opium was between 18,000 and 22,000 PR per kg, the equivalent of US\$ 164 to US\$200 per kg.

⁵¹ The price of heroin was 110,000 to 120,000 PR per kg, the equivalent of US\$1,000 to \$1,090 per kg.

⁵² The skilled "cook" was paid 5,000 PR per hour, the equivalent of US\$ 45.

⁵³ Unskilled workers were paid 2,000 to 5,000 PR per day, the equivalent of between US\$ 18 and US\$ 45 per day. Between four to six of these workers would be required for anything from seven to ten days.

⁵⁴ The price of acetic anhydride was between 110,000 to 120,000 PR per litre, and fell to 70,000 to 80,000 PR per litre after the airstrikes.

⁵⁵ The price of acetic anhydride was between 110,000 to 120,000 PR per litre, and fell to 70,000 to 80,000 PR per litre after the airstrikes.

⁵⁶ In Hilmand one man is the equivalent of 4.5 kg and consists of four charack and forty khord. Therefore one charack is the equivalent of 1.125 kg and one khord the equivalent of 112.5 grams.

⁵⁷ In Badakhshan one paw is the equivalent of 435 grams and consists of 24 tuli, making one tuli approximately 18 grams.

⁵⁸ Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson via teleconference from Kabul, Afghanistan, November 20, 2017

⁵⁹ One barrel consists of between 5 and 7 man of fresh opium, the equivalent of between 22.5 and 31.5 kg. This means that fifty barrels would be the equivalent of between 1,125 and 1,575 kg. With a conversion rate of between 9 and 13.5 kg of fresh opium to 1 kg of heroin, these 50 barrels would produce up to 175 kg of heroin and one barrel up to 3.5 kg. At a price of between US\$ 1,000 and 1,090 per kg at the time of the airstrikes these fifty barrels would have been worth up to US\$ 190,750, and one barrel US\$ 3,815. At a tax rate of US\$ 16.36 per kg these fifty barrels were worth \$2,863 in revenue to the Taliban.

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